

Crowds expected for Fourth of July weekend

By [Bailey Schulz](#) Las Vegas Review-Journal

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Not every Las Vegas hotel-casino will reopen in time to celebrate the Fourth of July, but the holiday is bound to be one of the city's busiest weekends of the summer.

Some may be spooked by Nevada's recent upticks in [COVID-19 cases](#), but travel experts say many others are ready to take advantage of the three-day weekend with a trip to Sin City.

"It'll be one of the busiest weekends of the summer, but not a pre-COVID level of business," said Amanda Belarmino, an assistant professor of strategic management at UNLV. "If we have a successful Fourth of July, both in terms of safety and in terms of business, it would help promote continued success."

With the lights still out at many properties and limited occupancy at the 15 Strip casinos that are open, it's unlikely that Las Vegas will match the [estimated 330,000](#) travelers in town for July 4 last year.

But there are signs traveler volumes will ramp up for the three-day weekend — the first since Las Vegas casinos were allowed to reopen on June 4.

‘A busy holiday weekend’

Various casino operators are already preparing for the holiday: [MGM Resorts](#) International announced that it would be reopening Luxor and The Shoppes at Mandalay Bay Place on Thursday and Aria and Mandalay Bay July 1. Bellagio, New-York New-York and MGM Grand reopened June 4.

Caesars Entertainment Corp. is set to have Caesars Palace, Flamingo, Harrah’s Las Vegas and Paris Las Vegas open in time for the holiday. Harrah’s reopened on June 5 and Paris on June 18.

“MGM Resorts and Caesars Entertainment are adding significant available room inventory right before the Fourth,” said Josh Swissman, founding partner of The Strategy Organization in Las Vegas. “While I think that those [four property openings](#) are indicative of a longer term increase in guest demand, the timing of their reopening points to a busy holiday weekend.”

Another indicator of increased demand: Las Vegas room rates have been on the rise in recent days.

On Wednesday, [Hotels.com](#) showed a stay at the Aria the night of July 4 starts at \$329, up from \$219 listed Monday. Rates at Caesars Palace also spiked between the two searches, from \$219 on Monday to \$249 on Wednesday.

Prices also spiked when compared to the Saturday of reopening weekend. A stay at Harrah’s Las Vegas started at \$75 on June 6 — according to a search that day — versus \$149 on July 4, according to a Wednesday search.

But one survey found the uptick in room rates across the Strip to be “modest.”

A June 11 report from SunTrust Robinson Humphrey found single-digit growth in room rates between the June 4 casino reopening weekend and the July 4 holiday weekend. Across MGM's properties, rates were down roughly 45 percent year-over-year.

“Early reopening feedback for many properties is encouraging, but it’s still unclear how sustainable pent up demand will be across the various segments,” said SunTrust gaming analyst Barry Jonas.

‘The perfect time’ for a getaway

Lisa Smith is one of many travelers ready to celebrate Independence Day in Las Vegas.

“It seemed like a perfect time because the resorts and the city would have a few weeks under their belts to work out any bumps in the new procedures,” said Smith, who plans to fly in from Michigan on July 1. “I think Vegas could be a leader and a success story, and I’m rooting for that to happen.”

Smith added that she believes the casinos’ safety protocols are “more than reasonable,” and isn’t concerned about contracting the virus during her stay.

Others, like San Francisco resident Andre Kim, worry that not enough tourists are following health and safety guidelines.

He visited Las Vegas in mid-June and plans to return for Fourth of July weekend. He hopes to see more people wearing masks on his next trip.

“Guests here seem like they’re rebelling against masks,” he said. “I feel bad because I feel like the hotels are doing what they can to stay open, but the guests are not doing their part. ... The guests are just completely ignorant and putting the staff at risk.

On Wednesday the state Gaming Control Board ordered Nevada casinos to require players and spectators of most casino table and card games to wear protective face coverings.

Stricter mask policies could be on the horizon. On Friday, Gov. Steve Sisoalk said he has asked his COVID-19 medical advisers to review “enhanced face covering policies” for Nevadans.

About 36 percent of U.S. adults said they always wear a mask while outside their home over the past week, according to data collected by [Gallup](#) between April 14 and April 20. Thirty-two percent said they sometimes wear their masks while out, and 31 percent never do.

Greg Chase, founder and CEO of Las Vegas-based Experience Strategy Associates, said casino and resort operators need to focus on continued, consistent safety protocols and messaging to make guests feel safe.

Brendan Bussmann, director of government affairs for Las Vegas-based Global Market Advisors, said despite concerns about the pandemic, regional travel demand is “definitely there.”

“Every weekend continues to be better, from what I hear from operators and partners around the country,” he said.

Even so, Bussmann doesn't expect the holiday weekend occupancy rates to hit pre-COVID levels anytime soon.

“Until air traffic is back to normal, we're not going to see numbers pop back up to normal crowds on the Strip,” he said.

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